

*NOSTALGIA SFÂNTULUI STEFAN. UNGARIA, MAGHIARII ARDELENI
ȘI PROBLEMA TRANSILVANIEI. 1918-1947*

*(NOSTALGIA OF SAINT STEPHEN. HUNGARY, THE TRANSYLVANIAN
HUNGARIANS AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSYLVANIA. 1918-1947).*

CRISTIAN SANDACHE 2019. CLUJ NAPOCA, ARGONAUT, 2019

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The study of Romanian-Hungarian relations has raised serious language problems in recent decades, because fewer and fewer Romanian researchers know the Hungarian language. The only ones who could research the subject of Romanian-Hungarian relations without much effort would be the Hungarians from Transylvania, because they are bilingual. In other words “the study of Romanian-Hungarian relations willy-nilly has become a topic monopolized by the Hungarian minority”.¹ Moreover, in continuation of what was stated above, it would be worth reproducing the conclusions we reached in another study dedicated to the Romanian-Hungarian literary and cultural relations, conclusions drawn in 2020, in a completely unexpected and optimistic tone, with the publication of the book *Imaginea românilor în operele scriitorilor maghiari (The Image of Romanians in the Works of Hungarian Writers)*, signed by the literary historian Felician Pop,² who revitalized the topic of Romanian-Hungarian relations in Romanian historiography: «As far as the Romanian part is concerned, there can be noticed a considerable diminution of the number of Romanian intellectuals proicient in Hungarian and still interested in Hungarian literature and the cultural relations between the two ethnic groups of Transylvania, the Romanian and the Hungarian one. Despite the ideological appearances and prejudices or dominating political correctness nowadays, communist Romania witnessed the publication of extremely important volumes on the literary and cultural Romanian-Hungarian

¹ Trifescu, Valentin 2017. “On the Advantages of Minority Condition in the Romanian-Hungarian Cultural and Literary Relations”. In «Acta Universitatis Sapientiae. Philologica», IX, 1, 13.

² Cf. Trifescu, Valentin 2020. Review to the book of Felician Pop, 2019: *Imaginea românilor în operele scriitorilor maghiari (The Image of Romanians in the Works of Hungarian Writers)*, pref. George Achim, Limes, Florești. In «Sargetia. Acta Musei Devensis», XI (XLVII), Deva, 521-524.

relations which significantly overcome qualitatively and quantitatively the Romanian historiographic production from the past years. The activity of Kriterion Publishing House in Bucharest needs to be particularly emphasized in this sense. However, along with the death of several Romanian intellectuals such as Avram P. Todor (1899–1978), Gavril Scridon (1922-1996) and Nicolae Balotă (1925-2014) – born before 1919 or during the interwar years in a society in which Hungarian was still a language of culture for the Romanian elites of Transylvania –, who dealt with the literary and cultural Romanian-Hungarian relations, the popularity of this topic of research started to decline at an alarming rate» (Trifescu 2017, 13).

If in the field of literary criticism and history, Romanian research was much more dynamic, in the field of historical writing an infertile inertia reigned from an intellectual point of view. If they wrote about interwar Hungary or about Transylvania in the years 1940-1944, Romanian historians remained tributary to some common places and taboos from the national-communist era. In this historiographical context, the publication of the book signed by Cristian Sandache, *Nostalgia Sfântului Ștefan. Ungaria, maghiarii ardeleni și problema Transilvaniei (1918-1947) / The Nostalgia of Saint Stephen. Hungary, Transylvanian Hungarians and the Problem of Transylvania (1918-1947)*, represents an editorial event, especially because of the author's courage to approach several particularly sensitive subjects without prejudice, but also because of the great empathy he has towards the Hungarians. What surprises us is the fact that Mr. Cristian Sandache, lecturer at the university of Galați, is Moldovan and has no direct personal connection with Transylvania. More than that, during this year, the same author published a synthesis dedicated to the history of the Szeklers.³ The author's efforts are to be appreciated, because he started to learn Hungarian, thus drawing on the original works of some Hungarian authors,⁴ although the vast majority of the books in the bibliography are in English. On this occasion, what we concluded a few years ago is confirmed: «We are witnessing a process of impoverishment of the Romanian culture because "the only possibility of dialogue between the two cultures is a "second hand" one mediated via the filter of translations from Hungarian into Romanian or from Hungarian into international languages» (Trifescu 2017, 13).

³ Sandache, Cristian 2022. "Cine știe, încotro ne duce destinul?". *O istorie a secuilor ("Who Knows, Where Destiny Takes Us?". A History of the Szeklers)*. Cluj Napoca. Argonaut.

⁴ Simó, Márton 2022. *Beszélgetés Cristian Sandache történész-egyetemi tanárral. "Mélyen vonzódok a székelyföldi emberekhez"*. URL: <https://www.3szek.ro/load/cikk/150625/%E2%80%9Emilyen-vonzodom-a-szekelyfoldi-emberekhez%E2%80%9D-beszelgetes-cristian-sandache-tortenesz-egyetemi-tanarral> (last access: 01.09.2022).

Historians must not only be good professionals, but must also develop great empathy for the topic of their research. More than that, we could say that without empathy, past events cannot be truly understood. History is not written in “cold blood”, in the name of objectivity, but in “warm blood”, lively, in the sense of “good subjectivity”. Professor Cristian Sandache’s book abounds in passages and whole pages from which he gains great empathy for Hungarians. Eighteenth-century Romanian nationalists could easily state that Mr. Cristian Sandache is “sold to the Hungarians” or “made a pact with the opponent”. However, things are not like that at all. The author is really just trying to understand the other side of the coin, and the other point of view that we, the Romanians, didn’t want or couldn’t understand. In this vein, to give just one example, regarding the attitude of Transylvanian Hungarians in the interwar era towards Greater Romania, Cristian Sandache argued that: «Romanian public opinion regards this attitude of the Hungarians as irrational, of a hostility hard to understand. On the other hand, the historian should analyse through the prism of reason (even if the inherent subjectivities obviously influence any scientific approach), trying to explain any attitude by contextualisation. The Transylvanian Hungarians could not have accepted the act of December 1, 1918 calmly, as long as they had a long history behind them, during which they had shaped the specifics of Transylvania (along with the German element), from a political and statal point of view» (9).

Mr. Cristian Sandache’s book is a one of political history, but written from the methodological perspective of cultural history. The surface political events are only a pretext for understanding the deep social, cultural or identity phenomena in Transylvania and Hungary in the years 1918-1947. Problems related to historical demography, collective mentalities, group psychology are touched on, or the speeches of opinion leaders who marked the Hungarian minority ethnic of the 20s-40s, such as István Apáthy, Károly Kós and Sándor Makkai, are analysed. The portraits of some prominent political and cultural personalities stand out, which were approached from a particularly brave perspective, because the author frees himself completely from the corset of political correctness or commonplaces. We refer here to the portraits made of Pál Teleki, Ferenc Szálasi and Albert Wass. To give an example, Cristian Sandache dedicated many pages to the personality of Ferenc Szálasi, pages that are similar in spirit to those written on the same topic by the Italian historian Claudio Mutti.⁵ This is not about the rehabilitation of controversial historical figures, but only about the intellectual courage to break out of the canon imposed for decades by the historiography of the victors, that left no room

⁵ Mutti, Claudio 2017. *Hungarica. Incursioni nel mito e nella storia dei Magiari*. s. I. EFFEPI. 75-86.

for nuances or any other interpretation. At one point, Cristian Sandache made a portrait of Ferenc Szálasi with almost literary valences: «Szálasi was finally caught and extradited to the new communist authorities, after he had managed to arrive (together with his partisans) in Austria. He was tried and sentenced to death by hanging, proving courage and dignity (both during the hearings and in the last moments of his life). He received his sentence with the same calmness with which he manifested himself in other moments of his turbulent existence, with a dreamy air, as if he were a character completely disconnected from reality, a wanderer on this planet dominated by misfortunes. His black eyes cast strange lights and his whole being seemed to be freed from all possible cares. The hour had struck and he was ready to start on his last journey, but as imperturbable as ever. There are even today in Hungary people who consider him a great patriot, a tragic figure, a martyr to the historical cause of his country. And at some ceremonies of the radical-nationalist formations, portraits of Szálasi are present, as if those of today would ask forgiveness from his still restless shadow. From the portraits, his beautiful face looks abstractly over the forest of human eyes, as if he wanted to convey to those people (even after death) the profound message of Hungarianism...» (227-228).

Professor Cristian Sandache's book is a completely non-canonical book within Romanian historiography dedicated to Romanian-Hungarian political and cultural ties. The author stands out for the originality and modernity of the conception, in the conditions in which he frees himself from the dogmas of Romanian nationalism, but does not fall into the slippages of political correctness promoted by the "cool Europeanist/globalist historiography". If we were to characterize this book with one word, it would be "empathy", although two more should be added to this one word, to be closer to the truth: "a lot, a lot of empathy...". In his research, Cristian Sandache used empathy as a real working tool, which also gave value to his scientific approach. Finally, we reproduce the thoughts of Professor Cristian Sandache, which can be considered as the formulation of a true profession of faith: «to consider the Hungarians as a foreign body *in corpore*, deeply hostile to the Romanian state, deciphering their reactions as either aberrant or incomprehensible, or completely reprehensible – represents the most accessible attitude, being specific both to the psychology of nationalism and to the common citizen, who has neither patience (nor interest) to analyse beyond what he sees, or is presented to him. As far as the historian is concerned, he is asked much more and first of all to admit that each person or collective has its interests, sensitivities, representations and (not least) its own historical memory/justice, which considers it the only viable one. Human subjectivity goes hand in hand with relativism and perceptions» (38).

Translated by Ana-Magdalena Petraru